5-2000

Rights and Culture in the Asian Values Argument: The Rise and Fall of Confucian Ethics in Singapore

Neil A. Englehart
Bowling Green State University, neile@bgsu.edu

HUMAN RIGHTS QUARTERLY

Rights and Culture in the Asian Values Argument: The Rise and Fall of Confucian Ethics in Singapore[1]

*Neil A. Englehart**

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural relativist arguments are problematic for advocates of universal human rights and democracy because a fundamental tenet of the universalist position is the need for tolerance. Universalists must advocate respect for both self-determination and democratic self-government. They can, therefore, be theoretically confounded by the paradoxical claim that some people might choose to be ruled undemocratically or voluntarily surrender certain basic rights—that they might, in Don Herzog's phrase, be "happy slaves."[2]

Before sweating through such difficult theoretical issues, however, it is worthwhile to assess the empirical plausibility of claims to cultural uniqueness. Unfortunately, such claims are sometimes made for cynical reasons. Jack Donnelly notes, for instance, that African governments making cultural relativist arguments are often highly selective in their application, basing them on traditions that no longer exist, or selecting only those elements of

* *Neil A. Englehart* is Assistant Professor of Government and Law at Lafayette College. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, San Diego. His scholarly interests revolve around political culture, strategic choice, modern state institutions, and democracy. His area of specialization is Southeast Asia. Research for this paper was begun while on a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Northwestern University, and it was presented at the Hinman Symposium on Democratization and Human Rights, Binghamton University, September 1998.

1. I would like to thank Adamantia Pollis, Ilan Peleg, John McCartney, and Melissa Miller for their comments on this paper. I am also indebted to Bruce Cumings, Alan Houston, Tracy Strong, Greg Noble, and Arend Lijphart for comments on an earlier version.
2. Don Herzog, Happy Slaves: A Critique of Consent Theory (1989).

tradition most useful to them.[3] Adamantia Pollis has similarly pointed to questionable uses of relativist arguments by some Asian and African regimes.[4]

The focus of this paper is a particular version of cultural relativism that holds that Asian cultures are characterized by a set of values that includes obedience to authority, intense allegiance to groups, and a submergence of individual identity in collective identity. The conclusion often drawn from such arguments is that democracy and human rights guarantees, at least as understood in the West, are alien to Asian cultures and inappropriate for them.

My aim is to evaluate the claim that cultural factors such as "Asian Values" really do militate against democracy and human rights. Because it is beyond the scope of a single paper to provide a comprehensive review of all the diverse Asian traditions, I will instead concentrate on one particular manifestation: the Confucian version produced in Singapore. I choose Singapore for two reasons. The first is that the Singaporean Confucian Ethics campaign provides the most well-articulated of the Asian values arguments. The second is that Singapore's former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, is actively trying to promote it elsewhere in Asia—in particular in the People's Republic of China, where he has found an enthusiastic audience.[5] While Singapore certainly does not represent all Asian cultures, the prominence the government of Singapore has assumed in the Asian Values debate makes its position worthy of examination.

This paper argues that the Asian Values claims of the government of Singapore—both in its first incarnation, as Confucian Ethics, and its current form, as Shared Values—have actually been advanced for political and ideological reasons and have very little to do with the traditional mores of the population. In this endeavor, I argue, the government of Singapore has been aided and abetted by an impoverished treatment of culture in Anglo-American political science—one which oversimplifies cultures and ignores important debates that are crucial to understanding how democracy and rights apply across cultures. Understanding the errors of the Asian Values argument requires rethinking the Western concept of culture. This paper

---

3. Jack Donnelly, Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice 118–21 (1989).
4. Adamantia Pollis, *Cultural Relativism Revisited: Through a State Prism*, 18 Hum. Rts. Q. 316 (1996).
5. There has been an ongoing exchange of ideas between China and Singapore, including scholarly symposia and visits by government officials. *See* Barbara Crossette, *Added Element in Asia: Confucius*, N.Y. Times, 28 June 1987, at A14; Andrew Roche, *Confucian Meeting Held Despite Opposition by Party Hardliners*, Reuters, 6 Sept. 1987; *Singapore Lessons for China Team*, Straits Times, 30 July 1992, Home, at 15; *International Seminar on Confucius Ends*, Xinhua Gen. Overseas News Serv., 4 Sept. 1987; *Party Leader Meets Scholars on Confucian Thought*, Xinhua Gen. Overseas News Serv., 8 Oct. 1989.

concludes with some reflections on the growing popularity of cultural relativist arguments in the post–Cold War world. All of this suggests the need for careful examination of the empirical plausibility of other claims to cultural uniqueness.

II. DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SINGAPORE

Despite a veneer of democracy that includes regular elections with universal suffrage, from a Western perspective, Singapore must be considered an authoritarian state. The rights provisions in the Singapore Constitution are weak[6] and there is ample evidence that the government violates the rights of citizens who criticize it. There has been no election that could reasonably be described as free and fair since Singapore's withdrawal from Malaysia in 1965.[7] It has a restrictive press law designed to prevent criticism of the government, hampering freedom of expression and restricting access to alternative sources of information. The ruling People's Action Party (hereinafter PAP) regularly harasses opposition parties, while allowing some parties to survive in a formal sense. The ability of opposition parties to organize and campaign is restricted and they are hampered further by legal harassment as well. One favorite PAP tactic is to sue opposition candidates for libel or defamation of character if they criticize the government or PAP members.[8] Government control of the judiciary ensures verdicts favorable to the PAP leadership.[9]

Between 1968 and 1981, Singapore's parliament did not include any opposition candidates. This created an embarrassing situation for the PAP, which was forced to seat its own backbenchers on the opposition side of the chamber, where they were asked to play the role of a "virtual opposition"—although still subject to party discipline.[10] The election of opposition

---

6. *See* Sing. Const. arts. 9–12.
7. The last "free and fair" election was in 1963. At that time, the now hegemonic People's Action Party manipulated the electoral rules to its advantage and won thirty-seven seats to thirteen against the opposition party, the Barisan Sosialis. Afterwards, the leaders of the opposition, including three assembly members, were promptly arrested on charges of communist conspiracy. *See* Shee Poon Kim, *The Evolution of the Political System*, *in* The Government and Politics of Singapore 3, 8–9 (Jon S.T. Quah et al. eds., 1987).
8. Singapore would not pass even a minimal test of a democratic regime, for instance that of Adam Przeworski, who defines democracy as "a system in which parties lose elections." Adam Przeworski, Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America 10 (1991) (footnote omitted).
9. *See* Sing. Const. arts. 22, 94–95. *See also* Christopher Tremewan, The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore 187 (1994).
10. *See* Chan Heng Chee, *Legislature and Legislators*, *in* The Government and Politics of Singapore, *supra* note 7, at 74.

Members of Parliament (MPs) has saved the PAP some of the embarrassment of needing its own members to fill up all of question time.

Since 1981, a handful of opposition MPs have been elected. The first, J.B. Jeyaratnam, has been sued for defamation by both the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his successor, Goh Chok Tong. Jeyaratnam has been periodically banned from parliament on legal grounds. Another prominent critic of the PAP, Francis Seow, was entitled to a seat following the 1988 elections. He was promptly convicted of tax evasion and fined enough to be barred from parliament. Furthermore, the government delayed the opening of parliament in order to allow the trial to be completed so that they could avoid seating him.[11] After his initial arrest, the *Straits Times*—which, like all Singapore newspapers, is reliably pro-PAP—editorialized that he should not be released in response to international protests on the grounds that "to release the man would be an admission that it had been wrong to arrest him, and such an admission would confuse those who have believed in the government."[12]

Other opponents of the government and the PAP have also been harassed by the bureaucracy or detained by police. Singapore has an internal security law inherited from the British colonial regime that has been used to indefinitely detain people perceived as dangerous to the PAP, usually on the grounds that they are Marxist conspirators seeking to overthrow the government.[13] This justification was last used in 1987 to detain a group of twenty-two community and church leaders as well as activists of the Worker's Party, the PAP's primary opposition at that time. When asked what proof the government had of the conspiracy, Lee Kuan Yew replied that he would not "allow subversives to get away by insisting that I [have] got to prove everything against them in a court of law."[14] These detainees later published an account of their treatment by the Internal Security Department (hereinafter ISD). The harsh treatment included sleep

---

11. *See* Tim Huxley, *Singapore's Politics in the 1980s and 1990s*, 23 Asian Aff. 282, 285 (1992); Ian Buruma, *The Singapore Way*, N.Y. Rev. Books, 19 Oct. 1995, at 66, 68. *See generally* Francis Seow, To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison (1994) (for Seow's version of these events).
12. *See* Seow, *supra* note 11, at 68. Seow, who was well-known because he had been Solicitor-General of Singapore, was released in late 1988. He left Singapore, was tried *in absentia*, and currently lives in exile in the United States.
13. The Singapore Internal Security Act (ISA) allows "preventive detention" without evidence or specific charges. A legacy from British rule during the "Malayan Emergency," the ISA was never repealed and has even been made more sweeping. Even those sympathetic to Singapore's government are generally critical of the ISA. *See, e.g.*, Melanie Chew, *Human Rights in Singapore: Perceptions and Problems*, 34 Asian Surv. 933, 942–44 (1994). As of 1982, over 1,000 people were detained without trial, 17 under the ISA and the rest under a provision in the criminal law code. 41 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 455 (3 Mar. 1982).
14. Seow, *supra* note 11, at 71.

deprivation, seventy-hour interrogations, physical assaults, and prolonged exposure without clothing to freezing temperatures.[15] Many other detainees have complained of similar physical and psychological abuse at the hands of police.

Chia Thye Poh, one of the world's longest serving political prisoners, is another example of Singapore's wrongful detention and harassment of government opponents. Chia was a Member of Parliament for the Barisan Socialis, a now-defunct party that at the time of independence was the PAP's major opposition. He was arrested and detained without trial from 1966 to 1992 under the Internal Security Act (hereinafter ISA).[16] He still faces restrictions on his residence and movements. Some critics of the PAP have claimed that Chia's long detention was meant to intimidate other potential opponents of the PAP by making an example of him. Many Singaporeans believe that the ISD routinely compiles files on people who publicly criticize the government; stories like that of Chia give teeth to an implied threat.[17]

As a result of this systematic harassment of the opposition, contesting a seat against the PAP is an act of extraordinary courage. Two of the three opposition members in parliament as of January 2000 were nearly barred from their seats because their party was bankrupted by a defamation suit brought by Prime Minister Goh against party leader J.B. Jeyaratnam. At the last minute, Goh declined to pursue the bankruptcy proceeding, probably to avoid creating sympathy for the Workers Party (hereinafter WP).[18] Goh successfully bankrupted another WP candidate, Tang Liang Hong, in a related suit tried in absentia. Tang currently lives in exile in Australia.[19]

The PAP does not ignore its constituents, however. MPs are required to talk with constituents in weekly "meet-the-people" sessions. Members perform special services for their constituents such as helping them with legal problems, assisting them in obtaining licenses or school admissions, and so on. MPs are also supposed to listen to complaints and suggestions and to keep their party leaders informed about public opinion.[20] However, once policy has been decided by the party leadership and is enacted in

---

15. The background and full text of this document has been reproduced in Chee Soon Juan, Dare to Change: An Alternative Vision for Singapore 133–37 (1994). After publication, the detainees were re-arrested and forced to recant.
16. *See* Stan Sesser, *Singapore: The Prisoner in the Theme Park*, *in* The Lands of Charm and Cruelty: Travels in Southeast Asia 3 (1993); U.S. Dep't State, *Singapore*, *in* Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1996, at 764, 765–66 (1997).
17. *See* Tremewan, *supra* note 9, at 203–04.
18. *See PM Goh Drops Petition Against Jeya*, Straits Times, 3 July 1999, at 2.
19. *See* Zuraidah Ibrahim, *Tang Liang Hong Meets PM Goh*, Straits Times, 4 Mar. 1999, at 2.
20. For more on the meet-the-people sessions, *see* Chan Heng Chee, The Dynamics of One-Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grass-roots 101 (1976).

parliament, the MPs are charged with accepting the policy and returning to their constituency to explain and defend it if it proves unpopular.[21] The PAP has enacted some highly unpopular and coercive policies, including social engineering projects designed to influence where people live, whom they marry, how many children they have, and what languages they speak.[22]

It is of little interest to the PAP whether its constituents approve of a particular policy. Protest, public criticism, and political mobilization are considered illegitimate. Policy is purely the purview of the PAP, which is interested in what Singaporeans think only as a matter of prudence: it does not want a population so disgruntled that it emigrates or revolts. The PAP leadership does not consider the electorate competent to judge matters of policy. One PAP leader commented that "we have to be seen to be consulting the people . . . [b]ut I don't believe that consultation with the people is a very productive exercise. People, even with education, tend to be irrational."[23]

The PAP leadership claims their authority to make decisions based not on the fact that they represent voters, but on their intellectual and moral superiority. They demonstrate this superiority at election time by advertising their candidates' school grades, exam scores, and other accomplishments. In 1984, the PAP even experimented with an elaborate screening process that included intelligence and psychological tests and a voluntary interview with a psychiatrist.[24] The message proclaimed is that the PAP is searching for the talented elite who are best equipped to rule.

The PAP further argues that such paternalism is normal and healthy in Asian cultures. The party posits that Asians want to be ruled by such an elite. As one Singaporean scholar noted, "a leader has a duty to ensure the general welfare of the governed, who in turn have a duty to respect and trust in the leader. . . . However, it should be noted that it is a reciprocity embedded in a hierarchical structure of unequals, and is thus unavoidably elitist."[25] A PAP Member of Parliament put it more succinctly: "Government is elected to lead, not to make decisions by popular consensus of views."[26] Lee Kuan Yew expressed this view in 1982:

---

21. This is of course quite similar to the Maoist Mass Line. In many respects the PAP is the most successful Leninist party in the world. *See id.*; Beng-Huat Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore 23–25 (1995).
22. The best single source on social policy in Singapore is Tremewan, *supra* note 9. *See also* Chua, *supra* note 21, at 9. For a very angry view, see T.S. Selvan, Singapore: The Ultimate Island (1990).
23. Cho-Oon Khong, *Singapore: Political Legitimacy Through Managing Conformity*, *in* Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority 108, 134 (Muthiah Alagappa ed., 1995).
24. *See* Selvan, *supra* note 22, at 68.
25. Chua, *supra* note 21, at 36.
26. Hong Hai, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 824 (14 Jan. 1991).

> I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Ye[t], if I did not . . . we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn't be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters—who your neighbor is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what's right. Never mind what the people think.[27]

Because they value such paternalistic government, Singaporeans are held to find it inappropriate to guarantee individual rights over the welfare of the group. They are said to respect authority, uphold the family, and believe that political leaders should direct any aspects of life that affect the good of the whole. As current Prime Minister Goh stated:

> [I]n Singapore, government acts more like a trustee. As a custodian of the people's welfare, it exercises independent judgement on what is in the long-term economic interests of the people and acts on that basis. Government policy is not dictated by opinion polls or referenda. This has sometimes meant overriding populist pressures. . . . [I]mplementing the right policies has on occasion meant administering bitter medicine. . . .[28]

The PAP has never formalized its political theory, but these quotations suggest the outlines: a Burkean model of virtual representation in the interests of society as a whole, placed in the hands of Platonic philosopher-kings. This is justified by an appeal to a semi-mythical Chinese sage and the unique cultural—even genetic[29]—qualities of Asians.

III. CONFUCIANISM IN SINGAPORE

Confucius has played an important but awkward role in the Asian Values argument developed in Singapore. By appealing to Confucius, the government was able to create a certain amount of ideological coherence in its version of Asian Values and to give it some academic respectability. There already existed a well-defined scholarly literature on Confucius that had developed some cachet as a theory of the cultural roots of the "economic miracles" of Japan and Taiwan. Unfortunately, there were few Singaporeans who knew much about Confucius. The PAP had to claim that Singaporeans were actually implicit Confucians who practiced Confucian principles

---

27. Buruma, *supra* note 11, at 68.
28. Bilahari Kausikan, *The "Asian Values" Debate: A View from Singapore, in* Democracy in East Asia 17, 20 (Larry Diamond & Mark F. Plattner eds., 1998). Goh goes on to credit the PAP's repeated re-elections as its reward for acting as "an honest and competent trustee of the people[.]" *Id.* at 21.
29. *See* Fareed Zakaria, *Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew*, 73 For. Aff., Mar./Apr. 1994, at 109, 117.

without explicitly recognizing them as such. In fact, there is actually scant evidence of Confucianism in Singapore prior to the government campaign launched in the 1980s, and there is good reason to doubt the motivations behind that campaign.

The PAP's emphasis on Confucianism is a recent phenomenon. Until the mid-1980s, the PAP leadership praised and encouraged "rugged individualism" in Singapore.[30] Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee even worried that the traditional Chinese practice of living in extended families could reduce economic efficiency. The shift to a rhetoric of Confucian conservatism followed a sharp decline in electoral support for the PAP, the election of an opposition MP in 1981, and the declining relevance of Cold War rhetoric in Southeast Asia. Thus, the rhetoric looked suspiciously like an attempt to stem the rise of Anglo-American liberalism among educated Singaporeans, the English-educated Chinese in particular. Cho-Oon Khong explained, "[t]he Confucian campaign was instituted by the ruling elite not because the citizenry was seeking a deeper understanding of its heritage, but rather because the leadership wanted to establish a set of cultural values it believed would further its policies."[31]

In fact, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Chinese Confucian credentials are not very impressive. Raised in Singapore and educated at Cambridge, he said in 1967 that "I am no more a Chinese than President Kennedy was an Irishman." For the first half of his life he was known as Harry Lee. A British Foreign Secretary once called him "the best bloody Englishman east of the Suez."[32] The PAP leadership is dominated by such English-educated Chinese.

The claim that Singapore as a whole is a Confucian culture is equally problematic. Singapore is a multiracial country. The PAP recognizes this fact and carefully mirrors the racial composition of the country in selecting its MPs. The 75 percent of the population that is Chinese is descended from immigrants—laborers hired by the British, not Mandarins schooled in the Confucian classics. These migrants were mostly Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese, while native speakers of Mandarin comprise less than one percent of the population.[33] Lee earned the ire of many Chinese Singaporeans by attempting to eliminate non-Mandarin dialects through an official "Speak Mandarin" campaign.[34]

---

30. Chua, *supra* note 21, at 26–27. *See, e.g.*, Lee Kwan Yew, *Text of Premier's May Day Message: Balance Between National and Individual Aims,* Straits Times, 1 May 1981, at 1; Goh Keng Swee, The Economics of Modernization 63 (1972).
31. Khong, *supra* note 23, at 125.
32. Zakaria, *supra* note 29, at 125.
33. Tremewan, *supra* note 9, at 89.
34. *See* Huxley, *supra* note 11, at 290, N. Balakrishnan, *Forked Tongues,* Far E. Econ. Rev., 25 Jan. 1991, at 19.

At one time there was a network of traditional Chinese schools in Singapore. They would have been the natural carriers of Confucian tradition; however, they were systematically destroyed by the PAP in the 1970s, ostensibly because they were hotbeds of communism. This reflected a change in educational policy designed to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to become fluent in English. It was thought at the time that this would help attract international capital to Singapore. This policy also had the convenient effect of removing a set of institutions that might have been used to organize an opposition to the PAP among their core Chinese constituency. By the time the PAP decided to launch the Confucian Ethics campaign in the 1980s, the Chinese schools, which could have promoted a Confucian revival among Chinese Singaporeans, had been eliminated. The government, therefore, was free to construct a Confucian campaign from the ground up.[35]

The Confucian Ethics campaign began in 1982 and continued into the early 1990s. It was waged on multiple fronts. The first was the introduction of a required Religious Knowledge course in the secondary school curriculum. Students could choose one of five courses, of which Confucian Ethics was only one. The PAP seems to have assumed that Confucian Ethics would get the highest enrollment, especially among the relatively secular English-educated Chinese. Disproportionate resources were invested in developing the Confucian Ethics course. The process of curriculum development was closely followed in the press—indeed, it became front-page news in the *Straits Times*.[36] These articles were spiced with references to the Chinese population as implicit Confucians who could easily be taught Confucian ethics.

Curricular development included, ironically, inviting American experts on Confucianism to help design the course.[37] The Ministry of Education explained that "Confucian ethics was a field which we were not familiar with and . . . we wanted to insure that the right approach was used to teach the subject."[38] In other words, the Confucians did not know their Confucius.

The foreign experts also assisted with the second front of the Confucian campaign, which was waged at elite educational institutions. Confucian studies received extensive support from the government, including the

---

35. *See* Tremewan, *supra* note 9, at 89–91.
36. *See, e.g.*, June Tan, *Confucian Ethics for Schools*, Straits Times, 4 Feb. 1982, at 1; Tan Lian & Hedwig Alfred, *Confucian Textbooks: Quest Begins*, Sunday Times (Sing.), 13 June 1982, at 1.
37. *See* Eddie C.Y. Kuo, *Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalization Movement*, *in* Confucian traditions and East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons 294 (Tu Wei-ming ed., 1996); Arif Dirlik, *Confucius in the Borderlands*, 22 Boundary 229, 239 (1995).
38. Chua, *supra* note 21, at 199.

creation of an Institute for East Asian Philosophies that focused on the academic study of Confucianism. The Institute was staffed with prominent foreign scholars. Confucian studies were encouraged in the regular universities as well.

However, Confucianism was not meant to be simply an academic exercise: the third front was a media campaign. Minister of Education Goh Keng Swee said, "Confucianism in Singapore will not be merely for the classroom. It will be interpreted as a code of personal conduct for modern Singapore and promoted in the form of public debate and discussion over the media."[39] Visiting scholars and Singaporean academics were accorded star status and their public talks were widely reported in the media. A series of newspaper articles and news spots also promoted Confucian ethics as a social philosophy relevant to Twentieth Century Singapore.[40]

None of the three strategies was successful. Despite the fact that no other Religious Knowledge course was backed by a massive government campaign, Confucian Ethics did not fare particularly well. It attracted only 17.8 percent of the enrollment in 1989 even after several years of the official government campaign. The most popular course was Buddhist Studies, with 44.4 percent of the enrollment, followed by Bible Knowledge with 21.4 percent.[41] With the Confucian Ethics course widely perceived as a failure, the entire Religious Knowledge program was abandoned in 1990. That same year the PAP folded the campaign on its other two fronts. The Institute for East Asian Philosophies was turned into a think tank studying the economy of the People's Republic of China, and academics studying Confucianism lost much of their official support.[42] At the same time, the government stopped the official campaign and its attendant media coverage. The campaign had not been well-received: minority groups perceived it as an attempt to impose Chinese culture on them,[43] while Chinese Singaporeans themselves resisted. Chinese women in particular saw the campaign as an attempt to subjugate them with an archaic and patriarchal

---

39. Kuo, *supra* note 37, at 299.
40. *See, e.g.*, *Why Confucianism*, Sunday Times (Sing.), 13 June 1982, at 13. A number of talks involving the visiting scholars have been published in Tu Wei-ming, Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge (1984).
41. *See* Kuo, *supra* note 37, at 306.
42. *See id.*; Khong, *supra* note 23, at 125.
43. Officially, Confucianism had been represented as a pan-Asian philosophy. According to Kuo, such a claim did not appeal to the non-Chinese. The paradox, and indeed the irony, is that when Confucianism was promoted as a universal moral system relevant to all peoples in Singapore, it became, in the view of the non-Chinese, an expansionistic conspiracy of the Chinese that threatened the legitimacy and relevance of the their own ethnic, cultural, and religious values. This was so precisely because it was impossible to separate Confucianism and "Chinese-ness" in the perception of the general public. *See* Kuo, *supra* note 37, at 304.

code of conduct, while the English-educated Chinese class whose development the PAP had encouraged in the 1970s noticed the authoritarian political implications of the campaign.[44]

Faced with a lack of resonance in the Chinese community and active hostility from minorities, as well as some Chinese, in 1991 the PAP substituted a more generic version of Asian Values rhetoric called "Shared Values." Shared Values avoided the chauvinist tendency perceived in the Confucian Values campaign and could be plausibly presented as a pan-Singaporean national ideology.[45] It also allowed for the possibility of retaining a few Confucian elements on the grounds that Confucianism was at least one of the traditions shared by Singaporeans. The most conspicuous of these Confucian elements in the parliamentary White Paper that launched the Shared Values campaign was the Confucian concept of *junzi*, rule by virtuous men.[46] This position allowed the PAP to salvage its elitist and paternalistic posture because the party could suggest its leaders were such virtuous men.

The pattern of evidence suggests a certain lack of sincerity in the PAP's argument that Singapore is a Confucian culture. The PAP first eliminated Chinese schools that were Confucian, instead trying to encourage English education among the Chinese. Then, years later, it tried to officially promote Confucianism, in part by importing experts from abroad. Finally, the PAP abruptly abandoned Confucian Ethics when the campaign faltered. Why then did the PAP devote so much energy to promoting Confucianism?

The Confucian Ethics campaign coincided with—and drew upon—international scholarly interest in Confucianism as the functional equivalent of Weber's Protestant Ethic. Some scholars explained the so-called East Asian "miracle" of industrialization in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore as a product of Confucian values.[47] Regardless of the merits of this argument, which are debatable, there was clearly a political agenda behind the promotion of Confucian Ethics. The economic dimension of modern, academic Confucian studies provided a convenient cloak for the political goals of the PAP.

Lee and the PAP leadership found the claim that Singapore typifies

---

44. *See* Tremewan, *supra* note 9, at 109; Kuo, *supra* note 37, at 303.
45. Although at the time many Singaporeans took Shared Values to be a continuation of the Confucian Ethics campaign, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that "[t]he term shared values, with its connotations of universal acceptance, is seen as an attempt by the government to make the Confucian philosophy that they embrace palatable to the non-Chinese and more liberal elements of Singapore's mixed society." *See* N. Balakrishnan, *Esprit de Core: Values Offer Shares in Confucian Society*, Far E. Econ. Rev., 7 Feb. 1991, at 27.
46. *See* Kuo, *supra* note 37, at 308.
47. See, *e.g.*, Tu Wei-ming, *A Confucian Perspective on the Rise of Industrial East Asia*, 42 Bull. Am. Acad. Arts & Sci. 32 (1988).

Confucian virtues useful for political reasons. They could use it to obfuscate the complexities and disagreements generated by economic growth and the PAP's own policies. This claim allowed the party to depict the country as homogenous. Confucian ethics allowed them to essentialize their citizens as people who are obedient and devoted to the community; thus, their citizens presumably would be unwilling to upset a political order that provides most citizens with a comfortable life in order to press such "individualistic" demands as a free press and *habeas corpus*. It also allowed them to depict this as the natural and harmonious product of an unchanging culture that causes Singaporeans to have certain attitudes and orientations about the world. They claimed Singaporeans were satisfied with soft-authoritarian institutions because they have, in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's terminology, an "un-civic" culture.[48] They are not at all like people in the West; democracy would make them unhappy—it would frustrate their craving for paternalistic forms of authority.[49]

Arif Dirlik has pointed out that this Confucian revivalism is attractive to authoritarian governments only because of its appropriation outside of its original cultural context.[50] It is deployed selectively to try to shape the identity of overseas Chinese in ways that are favorable to the regime. It is an attempt to convince them that their own tradition is one of obedience to authority and submission to the community. Ironically, this is a kind of orientalism—auto-orientalism, if you will. It essentializes "oriental" and "occidental" in ways that deny them any commonality. In order for the argument to work, East and West must be conceived of as utterly different.[51]

However, this auto-orientalism requires a selective interpretation of the Confucian tradition. The full tradition includes subaltern strands that justify resistance and rebellion on Confucian terms and provide grounds for judging the actions of rulers. The PAP's attempt to create an ideology of obedience to paternalistic authority rests on an impoverished understanding of culture, one which makes Confucianism the essence of being Chinese and which makes obedience to "virtuous rulers" the essence of Confucianism. A more sophisticated understanding of culture, one which recognizes that diversity and debate are central to any tradition, would make this argument problematic.

---

48. Gabriel A. Almond & Sidney Verba, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (1963).
49. To paraphrase (only slightly) Lucian Pye, discussed *infra*, the Asian Values argument does differ in its details from Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture*. The community orientation and trust of government that Almond and Verba saw as contributing to a civic culture are held to justify the absence of political competition in the Asian Values argument. *See* Lucien W. Pye, Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority at vii (1985).
50. *See* Dirlik, *supra* note 37.
51. *See id.*; Chua, *supra* note 21, at 147.

IV. THE DIVERSITY OF THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION

Confucianism—much less Chinese culture—is not a simple tradition with a single dominant strain. It is complex with a variety of strands, each of which may become dominant in different circumstances. To the degree that it actually informs the way Chinese Singaporeans understand and act in the world, its impact is likely to be ambiguous.

William Theodore de Bary has argued that there is a liberal strain in Confucianism—a Confucian tradition of philosophical individualism, a spirit of free inquiry, and a history of criticizing despotic rulers for abuse of power. To ignore this would be to falsify the Confucian tradition. While some Confucian scholars did advocate absolute obedience to a paternalistic government, others advocated decentralization, individual self-cultivation, skeptical inquiry, and the rule of law.[52]

Furthermore, there is a strand of Chinese culture that appropriates Confucian elements to celebrate rebels and condemn evil rulers.[53] Popular figures include heroic officials who criticize corrupt rulers and honest bandits or rebels who challenge evil emperors, obtain heaven's favor, and become fair and just rulers.[54]

Lionel M. Jensen has recently argued that the unity of the classical Confucian tradition is itself largely the product of Jesuit attempts to find a nascent monotheism in Chinese culture.[55] The Jesuits appropriated an early philosopher and transformed him into the bearer of a core Chinese tradition in order to serve their own ends. This later became a useful fiction for various groups in China, including later court scholars and turn of the century nationalists who were trying to invent national traditions to bind together Chinese diversity.

Even China's official Confucian tradition does not really glorify rulers or community per se. It emphasizes harmony with the Way, a supreme cosmic order encoded in kingdom, community, and the individual equally. People, including rulers, can and do sometimes violate this order, but in the end the lack of harmony they create rebounds to their doom. This complex of beliefs provides the basis for something similar to natural law, a transcendental standard to which both rulers and the ruled can appeal in order to judge and

---

52. Wm. Theodore de Bary, The Liberal Tradition in China (1983). *See also* Wm. Theodore de Bary, Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective (1998).
53. *See* Robert Ruhlmann, *Traditional Heroes in Chinese Popular Fiction*, *in* The Confucian Persuasion 141 (Arthur F. Wright ed., 1960); Yuji Muramatsu, *Some Themes in Chinese Rebel Ideologies*, *in* The Confucian Persuasion, *supra*, at 241.
54. In fact, Confucius himself appears as protagonist in a number of romantic, satirical, and even pornographic tales. *See* Lionel M. Jensen, Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization 21–22 (1997).
55. *Id.* at 151.

criticize each other's behavior. In this sense, Confucianism might well provide citizens with grounds on which to criticize the government.

In his insistence that the government of Singapore be allowed to set the terms of moral and political discourse and to punish those who transgress those standards, Lee is not assuming a Confucian position, but one akin to that universally reviled school of ancient Chinese philosophy—Legalism.[56] The Legalists taught that rulers should provide clear standards of conduct for their servants and ministers, and then punish terribly any deviation from those standards. These standards were constrained only by some rules of prudence; the ruler, in effect, became the arbiter of communal standards. This philosophy was supposedly adopted by the first Emperor of China, Chin Shr Huang Di, with such cruel and unjust results that the dynasty collapsed shortly after his death.

The PAP's Legalist brand of "Confucianism" met with a less violent but equally decisive rejection, leading the party to abandon the Confucian Ethics campaign. The PAP has tried to salvage its position, however, by turning to the more ambiguous rhetoric of Shared Values.

V. SHARED VALUES

As the failure of the Confucian Ethics campaign became clear in the late 1980s, the PAP began to renew earlier discussions of a plan to develop a "National Ideology" along the lines of *Pancasila* in Indonesia. The National Ideology discussion, cross-pollinated with Confucian Ethics, produced a hybrid campaign called "Shared Values," adopted as a White Paper by the parliament in 1991. The Shared Values are enumerated as:

1. Nation before community and society above self;
2. Family is the basic unit of society;
3. Community support and respect for the individual;
4. Consensus not conflict; and
5. Racial and religious harmony.[57]

Although the government disavowed any connection between the Shared Values White Paper and Confucian Ethics,[58] those outside the

---

56. *See generally* Han Fei Tzu, Basic Writings (Burton Watson trans., 1964), especially the selections entitled "Wielding Power" and "Precautions Within the Palace." *Id.* at 35, 84.
57. *See* Balakrishnan, *supra* note 45, at 27.
58. Arthur Beng Kian Lam, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 926 (15 Jan. 1991).

government[59]—and even some in it[60]—had difficulty making the distinction. The Shared Values were clearly meant to be Asian Values, however, and were frequently contrasted with the values said to characterize the "Western media."[61]

The values "society above self" and "consensus not conflict" provoked the strongest criticism from the two opposition MPs then in parliament: the former because they feared it might be used to justify human rights abuses and the latter because it might be used to squelch organized opposition. More significant, though, was the general atmosphere of distrust regarding the PAP's motives—something noted by the opposition and PAP members alike. As opposition member Lee Siew-Choh put it,

> National Ideologies . . . are all intended to serve certain political purposes. Similarly in Singapore, it can be seen that our Shared Values, as presently constituted, are also intended to serve a political purpose, that of thought control, namely, to condition the people to thinking along certain lines acceptable to the PAP.[62]

Although ostensibly Shared Values are the "distillation" and "crystallization" of the thoughts and values already held by Singaporeans,[63] Shared Values have been promoted using the same techniques as Confucian Ethics. They were introduced in a Parliamentary White Paper, dutifully discussed in the media and by academics. Their career has been less notorious than that of Confucian Ethics, however. Designed to moderate ethnic sensitivities, these Shared Values have stirred up less domestic opposition than the Confucian Ethics campaign did.[64]

Rhetorically, however, Confucian Ethics and Shared Values perform much the same function. They still permit the PAP to represent Singapore as a place where the values of the citizens are incompatible with Western liberal notions of human rights and democracy. Shared Values may actually be rhetorically superior because they carry no real historical and philo-

---

59. *See, e.g.*, Balakrishnan, *supra* note 45, at 27.
60. *See, e.g.*, Low Seow Chay, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 922 (15 Jan. 1991); Chin Harn Tong, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 955 (15 Jan. 1991).
61. *See, e.g.*, Maurice Choo, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 951 (15 Jan. 1991).
62. Lee Siew-Choh, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 906 (15 Jan. 1991).
63. Ong Chit Chung spoke for the Shared Values White Paper. He went on to say that "they are the common values which hold us together as Singaporeans and which we cherish and we uphold. Whether we know it or not, they are instinctively our guide." 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. cols. 809–10 (14 Jan. 1991).
64. Since the currency crisis in 1997, interest in Confucianism as a source of economic growth has declined as the Asian "miracles" have begun to look less miraculous. This has led to something of a decline in the attractiveness of Asian Values arguments generally; however, for reasons that are explained in the conclusion, I think there are important political reasons why such arguments will persist in the long run.

sophical baggage. This is politically expedient but makes it difficult to defend the claim that Shared Values represent a distinctive Singaporean culture.

The only content of Shared Values is that with which the PAP chooses to fill them—indeed, several PAP members made it clear during the White Paper debate that more values might be added at a later date.[65] This means, of course, that they do not represent any real tradition at all. Shared Values are thus more purely ideological than Confucian Ethics. Rather than representing any tradition or culture, they represent only what the PAP says they do. They cannot be subject to disputes about their meaning or identified with any particular community because they are invented, not a culture. The only way in which Shared Values can be claimed to have any cultural content is if one starts with an impoverished and simplified notion of culture in the first place.

VI. CULTURE

It is relatively easy to condemn the PAP for a cynical use of the Asian Values argument, both in its Confucian and Shared Values incarnations. The party's prior endorsements of individualism, assaults on Chinese schools, sudden adoption and equally sudden abandonment of Confucian Ethics for the even more ideological Shared Values, and demonstrated willingness to use any means necessary to remain in power all point to a lack of sincerity. The PAP has used a simplified, essentialist interpretation of culture in an attempt to solidify its own power and deflect criticism.

However, I think we must admit that Anglo-American political science has unwittingly lent credibility to this endeavor. The discourse on the relationship between culture and democracy has relied on a view of culture that conforms to an essentialist use of the term. We have generally failed to admit the complexity of cultures, instead trying to simplify them in ways that make them more tractable for study. This impoverished academic discourse has made essentialist arguments like the PAP's versions of Asian Values more plausible.

The dominant approach has been to treat culture as a relatively fixed set of psychological traits, as "values" and "orientations" that are learned early in life and are relatively stable. Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*[66] is

---

65. *See, e.g.*, Chew Heng Ching, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 907 (15 Jan. 1991); Chng Hee Kok, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. cols. 916–920 (15 Jan. 1991); Arthur Beng Kian Lam, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. cols. 905– 908 (15 Jan. 1991); Lew Syn Pau, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 959 (15 Jan. 1991).
66. Almond & Verba, *supra* note 48.

the most prominent example of the genre, but the approach remains highly influential, with more recent works including Robert D. Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*,[67] Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*,[68] and Ronald Inglehart's *Modernization and Postmodernization*.[69] In this approach, culture is a static and primordial set of attitudes and dispositions. Almond and Verba, for instance, describe political culture as "attitudes," "development patterns," and "a set of orientations."[70] Certain orientations are held to be typical of a given population and to determine the ways in which they can interact with political institutions. They remain more or less fixed in a population over time and determine the kinds of political institutions those people can have. Countries that have a "civic culture" that promotes mutual trust, equality, and faith in good government can have stable democratic institutions; those lacking such a culture cannot. A people possessing an un-civic culture are held to be intrinsically unsuited to democracy in just the way that Asian leaders, for instance, claim that Asian values make their peoples unsuited to democracy. If Singaporeans lack the proper cultural orientations, democracy cannot prosper there. Culture in this view is a set of psychological traits that constrain people's actions. In the same tradition, Lucien Pye writes that all of Asia suffers from "paternalistic forms of power [that] answer deep psychological cravings for the security of dependency"[71]—a conclusion with which the PAP would happily concur.

This is a fundamentally conservative vision of culture.[72] People are defined by a fixed cultural essence; this essence limits their political options and there is thus little room for change. Attempting to alter political institutions creates a risk of instability because the new institutions may be inappropriate for that particular culture. Changing a culture would require altering the basic personality structure of an entire population.[73] Power drops out of the analysis altogether. The primary concern is with congruence between institutions and cultures, which is a technical rather than a social or political matter.

---

67. Robert D. Putnam et al., Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (1993).
68. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996).
69. Ronald Inglehart, Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies (1997).
70. Almond & Verba, *supra* note 48, at 13–14.
71. Pye, *supra* note 49, at vii.
72. Of the influential works cited *supra*, only Inglehart's *Modernization and Postmodernization* escapes this tendency, primarily because of the author's explicit interest in cultural change. Inglehart, *supra* note 69.
73. Pye at one point suggested that this might be a legitimate goal of foreign aid policy. *See* Lucian W. Pye, Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity 295–301 (1962).

Such a vision of culture is over-simplified and inadequate. First, cultures are not unitary, and so treating them in terms of a single model personality is too simplistic. Cultures do not have a single essence. As we have seen in the case of Confucianism in Chinese culture, they contain multiple, overlapping, and contradictory strands. Debates are often as important as points of agreement. Subordinate strands sometimes emerge into dominance, and dominant strands become subordinated in response to changing historical circumstances.[74]

Second, cultures do change over time, as people innovate, borrow, and learn from experience—indeed, virtually all of the history of ideas is built on this premise.[75] Many of the political and social institutions of modern Asia—including bureaucracies, modern armies, capitalism, communism, Leninist parties, and representative democracy—are cultural developments that originated in Europe and were spread around the globe through the creation of colonial empires. Although adapted to local circumstances, each has European roots.[76] In some sense they are local variations on a global political culture. One cannot summarily dismiss the relevance of Western liberal ideas like democracy and human rights to Asian countries on the grounds of cultural difference when those countries have had no problem in adopting other aspects of Western political culture which they find useful. In fact, Western political ideas may be very useful for helping people in Singapore think about what kind of institutions they want to govern them. Arend Lijphart's notion of consociationalism, for instance, might be a likely candidate, given the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of Singapore.[77]

Finally, essentializing culture as national personality emphasizes difference and minimizes the things we all share as human beings.[78] It is only by distancing "us" from "them" that an argument that some people could be intrinsically unsuited to democracy becomes plausible.

---

74. *See, e.g.*, Edmund Ronald Leach, Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure (1954) (accounting how Kachin culture can oscillate between hierarchical and egalitarian forms of political organization).
75. It is significant in this respect that Almond and Verba overlook the possibility that, rather than these attitudes and orientations determining the structure of institutions, they are instead the product of interactions with pre-existing institutions. *Cf.* Almond & Verba, *supra* note 48.
76. As PAP MP Arthur Beng Kian Liam put it during the Shared Values debate, quoting from the White Paper, "Westernisation has helped us to run a more rational government, and build a more efficient economy." Arthur Beng Kian Liam, *in* 56 Sing. Parl. Deb. col. 926 (15 Jan. 1991).
77. *See* Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration (1977).
78. In the Asian context, this is familiar as Edward Said's "orientalism," using one's impressions of another culture in an effort to define "us" by contrast. Edward W. Said, Orientalism (1978).

The essentialist conception of culture still seems to dominate in political science,[79] even though in anthropology the notion of culture as a fixed and bounded object of analysis is out of fashion.[80] This conception is inaccurate and serves too well the interests of authoritarian rulers seeking to justify anti-democratic activities and human rights abuses.

Even the discourse on multiculturalism, which might otherwise hold out hope for a more sophisticated approach, tends to essentialize cultures—adding only an ethical consideration that cultures should be treated as coequal. This simply reinforces the problem of culture abuse in post–Cold War authoritarian rhetoric. Since rulers now can claim cultural difference as an explanation and justification of human rights abuses, they can also deflect criticism by labeling it as cultural imperialism.[81]

Cultures are more flexible and complex than this. All cultures contain multiple traditions. While some may dominate at times, there are always subaltern strands that, given the right conditions, may eventually emerge as dominant. Furthermore, cultures adapt in response to changing circumstances and may acquire elements from other cultures as well.

We need a more flexible way of thinking about culture, one that allows us to acknowledge cultural complexity and contradictions. A useful example is provided by Thomas A. Metzger in his study of the reaction of Neo-Confucian scholars to Western philosophy.[82] Metzger conceptualizes culture as a set of debates about points of common concern, an approach that has the virtue of making disagreement central and therefore eliminating the temptation to essentialize a culture. These debates are shaped not only by intellectual considerations, of course; people who have power wield it in a way intended to secure the dominance of ideas useful to them—as, for instance, the PAP does in Singapore. In this view, foreign ideas or criticisms are not irrelevant or inappropriate—they may in fact be extremely useful. Metzger notes that Western philosophy became important to Neo-Confucian debates in China because it provided a new way of thinking about old problems. Similarly, democratic theory may be useful for Singaporeans who

---

79. For instance, Putnam analyzes the culture of Northern Italy, which permits democracy to "work" well there. Democracy depends on the psychological orientations of people towards each other and their community. The origins of this culture stretch back mysteriously into "the mists of the Dark Ages." Putnam et al., *supra* note 67, at 180.

80. *See* Ann-Belinda S. Preis, *Human Rights as Cultural Practice: An Anthropological Critique*, 18 Hum. Rts. Q. 286 (1996).

81. On this point, see K. Anthony Appiah, *Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction, in* Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition 149 (Amy Gutmann ed., 1994).

82. Thomas a. Metzger, Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture (1977). *See also* David D. Laitin, *Political Culture and Political Preferences*, 82 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 223 (1988). Metzger's approach has been usefully employed in David D. Laitin, Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba (1986).

wish to think about new institutions for their country, which is of course precisely what the PAP fears.

Without a more sophisticated view of culture, we are handicapped in responding to an argument like the one voiced by the PAP about Asian Values. We need to be able to recognize that the debate over human rights and democracy in a place like Singapore is not really a debate between two cultures, one Asian and one Western. It is really a debate within a state about what form their political culture should take: one that accepts paternalism or one that tolerates diversity. Representatives of both positions have cultural resources to deploy in defense of their claims, even if one also wields political power in ways that make the debate rather one-sided.

VII. CONCLUSION

The governance of Singapore's interest in Confucian ethics began in the early 1980s and was partly a response to domestic developments. However, it is also part of a broader movement, one which is global in scope and related to fundamental changes in the international system.

The broader "Asian Values" movement is an example of a kind of rhetoric that is increasingly common in authoritarian countries since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, there was a remarkable ideological convergence around the ideals of democracy and human rights, largely due to the fact that the superpowers polarized the international system and both officially espoused those ideals. They were ideals that were honored more in the breach than in practice, however. Both superpowers valued loyalty and stability in their allies, more than they valued democracy and human rights. Both were prepared to support authoritarian regimes on whose support they could rely. Such authoritarian regimes had convenient, ready-made rhetoric with which to justify the abuse of their own citizens. If aligned with the United States, they could claim that repressive activities aimed at securing their power were really taken in defense of liberty and democracy—ideals that could be fully manifested only after subversive internal enemies bent on establishing a totalitarian communist government were vanquished. If they were aligned with the Soviet Union, they could claim that they were serving the interests of the people but US imperialism and domestic counter-revolutionaries had to be dealt with before the full glory of socialism would be manifest.

With the end of the Cold War, however, communists no longer pose a credible threat for those aligned with the United States while the internal collapse of the Soviet Union makes it difficult to justify sacrifices in the name of the socialist future. The decline of foreign aid has made this posture less profitable as well.

One consequence of these changes is that authoritarian regimes need new justifications for the inhumane treatment of their political opponents. Pre–World War II forms of non-democratic corporatism are attractive for this purpose. They valorize the common good, as defined and directed by political authorities. Individual rights are devalued because they are said to promote selfish, antisocial behavior. Democracy is held to encourage irresponsible competition between groups in society and to promote corrupt interest group politics. Strong paternalistic leadership is said to overcome these problems, by allowing those who rule to promote the public good most effectively and suppress disruptive elements.

In order to justify this shift away from the dominant democratic discourse to a more paternalistic, anti-democratic one, authoritarian leaders are increasingly turning to cultural relativism. This argument is meant to put human rights abuses beyond the reach of criticism. The "Asian Values" argument is only one example of such an argument but it is perhaps the most prominent. Yet, the discussion above illustrates that its most influential version—that employed in Singapore—is implausible and appears to be made for cynical reasons. While this does not constitute proof that the argument is wrong in all cases and for all countries, it does at least suggest that such cultural claims demand close inspection wherever they are made.

Singapore is an obvious candidate for democratization by most accounts. People are well-fed and housed; there are even political parties, a parliament with sovereign authority, an extremely efficient bureaucracy responsive to civilian rule, an educated and sophisticated electorate, and regular elections. Such a change would require a commitment to truly democratic rule on the part of the government of Singapore, however, and that is exactly what is contraindicated by the Asian Values argument. As we have seen, however, the obstacles to democracy in Singapore are not so much cultural as political. The "Asian Values" argument, in Singapore at least, simply provides a justification for the ruling party to deny certain political and civil rights to its citizens, one updated for the post–Cold War world.